

# Company Laundress

The army allowed laundresses to live down the road from the fort. Young girls could be laundresses, if they were at least thirteen years old and were able to do the work. There could be four laundresses for every hundred men. The laundresses served under the post commander. They received housing, fuel, services of the post doctor, and daily food. Often an enlisted soldier would receive permission to marry a laundress. If the marriage were approved, the husband/soldier could live with the laundress.

These washerwomen lived in crude housing on what was called *Suds Row* or *Sudsville*. Generally, these homes were old huts, tents pitched on lumber frames, shacks built of old boards, or tents made of gunny sacks. The women kept their homes warm by packing snow and straw around the outside in the winter. They bought their kitchen supplies from the sutler's store at the fort.

Washerwomen worked very hard all year. They had to haul the water for washing clothes from the nearest spring, lake, or river. They had to make their own soap. They made soap by mixing lye, wood ashes, and lard. They hung clothes on a clothesline to dry.

The laundresses were subject to the military law of the fort. One laundress is known to have been court-martialed (tried in court) for using disrespectful language to an officer. The laundresses were described as being rough, tough, and capable women who lived together in dirty houses where dogs and chickens roamed outside. Many had several children with them. The washerwomen helped each other and the wives of the officers during childbirth and illnesses of the children.

A hard-working laundress could earn up to \$40 a month.

## Laundress Daily Life

The children of a laundress and soldier would live with them in *Sudsville*. Sometimes, husbands took their turn watching the children while the wives did the laundry.

Laundresses could charge officers up to \$4 per month for laundry services. Or, they could charge them \$1 per dozen items.

Laundresses and their husbands could cook and eat in their own quarters in *Suds Row*. They were allowed to keep milk cows for their private use. They could buy food in town or from the post sutler.

Laundresses needed scrub boards, wash boards, irons, an ironing board, pails, soap and water to correctly wash the clothes.

Conditions in *Suds Row* could be difficult. Most tents or shacks did not have a lot of light or ways for fresh air to come in. Nearby "privies" (outhouses) and chicken coops added to the unhealthy conditions. Dirty water might be dumped nearby also.

The laundresses had to split their own wood for building fires. They had to be very careful. If they cut themselves and the cut did not heal, they could die of an infection.

Laundresses were mid-wives (helped delivery babies) and nurses for each other and for the wives of officers.

Laundresses could bake pies for soldiers as a way of earning more money.

## Washing Procedures

Washers and dryers were not available during the 1860s. People had to wash by hand to clean their clothes. The water had to be hauled from nearby sources. The soap had to be handmade. The clothes had to be scrubbed until they were clean. If one laundress washed for 25 soldiers, then a lot of hard work was necessary to properly wash clothes the old-fashioned way.

1. Fill the tub with water until it is \_ full.
2. Place the washboard in the tub of water.
3. Stand or kneel behind the washboard.
4. Dip the dirty cloth into the water.
5. Place the wet cloth on the washboard.

6. Rub the soap on the cloth.
7. Turn the cloth over with the soapy side facing the washboard.
8. Rub the cloth against the washboard, using up and down motions.
9. Dip the cloth in the wash water to remove some of the soap. Rinse the cloth in clean water.
10. Hang the cloth on a clothesline to dry.